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Futurus Team Is an Expensive E-Mail Solution

Nelson, Fritz; Carpis, Marios

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Abstract:

Futurus Corp.'s Futurus Team Version 2.02c extends the reach of electronic mail systems into a more collaborative LAN-based application. Futurus Team offers simple messaging and archiving capabilities, but its lack of direct connectivity options and awkward user interface can be daunting. However, the product does offer support to a variety of network platforms through Message Handling Service (MHS) compatibility. Team lends itself to intergroup communications, but setting up the syntax required to access remote mail systems using a variety of gateways can be difficult. Although there is no tutorial, a novice user should be able to use the basic functions of the program immediately without difficulty. The product offers all the basic messaging features as well as many useful desktop managing models. However, the product is expensive and lacks some of the more sophisticated administration functionality that its competitors offer, such as maintenance utilities and directory propagation.

Text:

Futurus Corp., like WordPerfect, has provided a product in Futurus Team, Version 2.02c that extends the reach of your electronic mail system into a more collaborative LAN-based application. This product, which ships with both DOS and Windows flavors in the same package, grew out of the DOS-based Right Hand Man package.

Though Futurus Team is not quite as complex or as smooth as WordPerfect Office, it provides a full-fledged MHS-based messaging system for DOS and Windows users.

Futurus Team offers simple messaging and archiving capabilities; however, its lack of direct connectivity options and awkward user interface can be daunting. The product does, however, offer support to a variety of network

platforms through Message Handling Service (MHS) compatibility. Team lends itself to intergroup communications in, for example, a small department, but setting up the syntax required to access remote mail systems using a variety of gateways can be painful.

Team also offers several features unavailable in better known products such as cc:Mail or Da Vinci eMail. For example, there is the Notepad feature, in which you can create shared notes that are searchable by text string. You can password-protect your note for security. A to-do list is available to sort and track your daily tasks. This module presents tasks as a list of lists, that is, multiple tasks in each list. It shows the total number of tasks, as well as indicating the number of tasks that are currently due or are overdue. You can set up the program to notify you of tasks due for the day.

A database program and the Cardex database--a proprietary database of index cards from which you can even dial a phone number--offer a handy reference tool for contact information. And Futurus includes a personal and group scheduler for tracking appointments, scheduling group meetings, and using resources, such as conference rooms or equipment. With the group scheduler, find everyone's first available meeting time.

Finally, there is a chat mode--found more often in remote control products than in electronic mail software. This module uses NetWare Internetwork Packet Exchange (IPX) to create an online bidirectional chat window capable of handling messaging among as many as five users. We previously compared E-mail software in the April 16 issue, page 105.

PERFORMANCE USER:

MESSAGING: Futurus has the basics of messaging covered and then some. First of all, this is a TSR program. When activated with a simple Ctrl-L-Shift key combination, it occupies a mere 10.6K of base memory and swaps the rest of the program to disk. To begin composing mail in the electronic mail module you first choose a message template from the Compose menu. The template consists of the standard fields: To, cc, bcc, Message Subject, Message Priorities, and a list of file attachments.

The phone message center template includes a variety of items, including the option to identify a caller as a frequent caller, which allows you to access the caller's complete information simply by typing the first few letters of the name. Message senders can attach as many as 64 files at the file attachment field by using the Insert key and selecting files from the resulting list. Message receivers must extract the files using the Extract command under the File menu. You can define a default directory for these attachments in the configuration options.

Selecting users is a matter of composing a message, typing the beginning of a name, then choosing names from lists of users and from defined groups (administrators and users alike can define these groups). You can request a receipt notification--either as a standard practice via configuration settings or with each message. You can also set message priorities at high, normal, and low.

When you receive an incoming message or the indication that a message you sent has been received, you can elect to have Team alert you with a tone

or, if you wish, it can actually load the program's mail module. You can also elect for both or neither of these actions to occur.

In Windows, Futurus has added a notification agent called Teaminator. You can customize the notification you receive for each type of event, be it a scheduled meeting, an item on your to-do list, or an incoming E-mail or phone message, by beeping, flashing the application title bar, or actually launching an associated application. Though the documentation refers to this feature as the Teaminator, the icon appears as FT Notify.

Message recipients can reply to mail automatically with a single keystroke combination. Under reply configuration options you can include the original message body, the date, the time, and various other mail header information (you can choose subsets of these). You can also choose to reply to the message sender. There is a "reply to all" feature, but it is confusingly labeled "reply to cc" in the configuration options. Sending mail to unknown recipients produces a file-create error--this can occur if the path to the recipient is incorrect or the server specification for that user is invalid. The product requires that you put in a message subject and generates a reminder if you overlook this box. Messaging is very good.

ARCHIVING: Futurus Team organizes messages received in an in box and displays date, time, importance, from, and subject headings. You can change the message order by any of the headings under the Options menu; however, you cannot rearrange the position of these headings as you can in cc:Mail. When you delete a message, Team stores it a trash directory that you can configure to purge after a set amount of time. Messages can be tagged for enmasse deletion as well. You can also store messages in folder-style "boxes." In Team, "archiving" means logging an outgoing message in a special archiving box--a bit confusing in contrast to the typical use of the word to connote file storage. The Windows version lets you export a range of phone messages to the clipboard to include in a separate file.

Futurus Team does not have Beyond-Mail's sophisticated sorting capabilities, which let you to sort and store incoming mail based on a wide variety of criteria. It also lacks the conversation-threading features of Da Vinci eMail, which lets you pull all original, forwarded, and replied mail from a single sustained messaging "conversation." However, Futurus Team lets you search through messages based on keywords of up to 19 characters. Archiving is very good.

PRINTING AND WORD PROCESSING: Futurus Team supports basic DOS printing from all of its modules and Hewlett-Packard LaserJet HPGL emulation support from the program's scheduling portion. However, the program does not offer PostScript print drivers. Mail menu options let you print all your phone messages or a range of these messages. You can also use a Futurus capture feature to intercept printed output to be included in an E-mail message (or you can output the text to a file). This is known as "mail enabling." You actually print to a particular LPT device that has been configured to activate the mail module. The module pops up already containing the message information; you simply complete the address information. For NetWare (Version 2.x and later), Futurus provides a Print Queue Manager that lets users who have Print Queue operator privileges speed up a print job, put a print job on hold, and exercise other print management options.

The basic Futurus editor doesn't offer much in the way of text formatting tools. You can set word-wrap mode in the configuration options, but there are no tab or margin settings as in the new versions of cc:Mail. Nor is there a thesaurus or a spelling checker as there is in the Windows version of WordPerfect Office. In the Futurus Windows version you do have the standard Windows Cut, Copy, and Paste options, as well as an Undo Delete command.

But, much like the WordPerfect Office DOS version, which also has few text formatting features, Futurus provides a resident text editor. Control-key options let you skip around words and lines, and you can insert text using the Insert key. Ctrl-B allows you to reformat a paragraph, and other combinations let you repeat keystrokes. You can search and replace text and include a date-and-time stamp. Futurus attributes the limited word-processing capabilities to the fact that many Windows word processors are mail enabled, and users might be more comfortable composing and editing in their familiar word processing environment. However, we don't see that as a convincing argument; it is inconvenient to have to leave the E-mail environment to compose documents that require any but the simplest of formats. Printing and word processing is good.

USER SECURITY: Futurus Team uses the directory access structure of the network operating system to secure mail on a LAN. Nonessential data is protected with a password--this includes information to which others in your group require access, such as your schedule for group scheduling. Essential data is protected with two levels of security: network access rights and a password. User mail files, stored separately from program files, are based on user name. During installation, the administrator can assign minimal security in which each user's mail directory is a subdirectory of the Futurus Team root directory. Everyone has rights to this root directory, so instead, information is password-protected. But by selecting the maximum security option, network administrators can separate users' mail directories and assign limited access rights to the files themselves, thus requiring both network log-in and mail log-in.

Maximum security is available using the MHS option to store E-mail in an MHS subdirectory. With MHS enabled, you can take advantage of this extra level of security, which provides message encryption even in the mailbox. It does not provide intruder lockout, but a password is required to access different MHS subdirectories. At all security levels, file attachments are stored in a separate subdirectory under the user's mail subdirectory. The product comparison in our April 6 issue (page 105) provides more detail on this topic.

Although this security structure is quite adequate, it doesn't follow the model of programs like cc:Mail, which codes users' mail subdirectory names. Futurus Team allows anyone to see whose mail is stored and where. The program stores the mail itself, however, in a proprietary file format. Security is good.

PERFORMANCE ADMINISTRATOR:

INSTALLATION AND MAINTENANCE: Futurus Team is not difficult to install. It

presumes you at least know the type of network you have. You specify the directory for Futurus program files (a directory accessible by everyone). Futurus will ask whether you want to install new software, or it will allow you to upgrade your version or add user licenses (a nice automated feature). You must select the type of network you are on (supports NetWare, NetWare Lite, LANTastic, LAN Manager, Banyan Vines, and several other NetBIOS-compatible networks.).

LANTastic and NetWare administrators can choose to add users or groups based on existing network directories. In the case of NetWare, Futurus Team takes names from the NetWare Bindery if you specify this option. Though it is somewhat complicated, you can select from the list the number of users you want up to the number of licenses you have defined--they are taken in order of the listing and you can select or ignore each list entry until you have selected the requisite number. By logging into Futurus as the administrator or--as the Global user--you can add users through the User/Group maintenance module. This module lets you add names, set passwords, and define groups and resources. In NetWare, a user has a user name, a personal name, and a user mail directory.

Furthermore, Futurus has no true post-office-to-post-office connectivity. It provides no requirement and thus no way to propagate user directory changes across different mail systems. Nor does it enhance MHS through such a feature; Futurus will rely on developments in MHS technology to address these requirements.

If you are upgrading from the previous Windows version of Team, a minor change is necessary to your Windows INI file. The installation program adds a reference to the FTDRIVER.EXE file in the program load line. This will cause application errors to appear when you load the program. You must delete this reference manually using a text editor and substitute a reference to FTNOTI-FY.EXE instead. The installation program in the new version prompts you to indicate if you are upgrading from the previous Windows version. It does not, however, make this corresponding change to the INI file automatically. We rate installation and maintenance good.

MAIL SERVER MAINTENANCE: Within a pure Futurus environment--a mail system on a single network--Futurus offers no maintenance tools for its E-mail database except for its preset purging feature. Futurus relies on MHS for maintaining its global E-mail settings. Although MHS is a stable standard environment, supported by the majority of E-mail vendors, Novell has done little to improve upon its original design. E-mail vendors like Da Vinci and Beyond, which also rely on MHS, often provide enhancements. Futurus does not, and you will therefore have to rely on MHS' ADMIN.LOG file to track server activity. Unfortunately there are no tools to sort quickly through this file.

Although we had no server problems in our testing, the product would benefit from a feature similar to BeyondMail's REBUILD.EXE to make server file repair easier. Mail server maintenance is satisfactory.

INTER-LAN LINKING The regular version of Futurus Team is meant to be a single-LAN E-mail implementation, with a single post office. To use

multiple servers across networks, you must purchase the WAN version of this product. Even then, it only works across bridged Novell NetWare servers. To set this up the NetWare administrator must select the master server (which keeps an inventory of all Futurus users and groups and on which server and volume they are located) and change some NetWare environmental variables on each server (namely, the administrator calls out the master server name in the system Da Vinci scripts).

Sending mail to a remote mail system is no mundane task. Futurus, by supporting MHS, provides remote system access through any MHS-to-foreign-host gateway. To help here, Futurus provides an editable FT.REM file that helps administrators create mail system syntax scripts that prompt users for just the basic information (such as the person's name) and then allow users to add these recipients as permanent users. The gateway syntax in this file includes fax (FaxPress, Fax-MCI, EZ-Fax, NetFax, and LANFax), MCI (you must purchase a separate M-Bridge product Futurus resells from CMS), and CompuServe. There are no Profs or X.400 gateway options. Inter-LAN linking is good.

ADMINISTRATION SECURITY: The Futurus Team administrator uses the same program files all other users do, but the administrator has access rights to create and modify Futurus root directory files, such as database (Cardex and Notepad) files for everyone to use. The administrator also has rights to modify the user and group information. Access to all of these files-kept separate from user message files-is restricted by requiring a user to log in as Global with the correct password. That means that any user who knows the password can get in and change key information. We didn't find this to be as secure as making the administration program itself a separate program-any user can run it. Even NetWare's capability to create hidden files is negated. We rate administration security satisfactory.

DOCUMENTATION:

Futurus Team documentation leaves much to be desired. There are only a few helpful graphics--diagrams, screen shots, or otherwise--and the organization of this manual seems to follow little predictability when compared with the documentation accompanying similar products. The index is sparse and incomplete.

Some of the information is also incomplete or confusing. For example, the "Getting Started" section refers us to another section but gives no page or section reference. Another page makes mention of the mail screen Message Bar but provides no description or picture of where it is. On-line help provides no more information than what's in the manual and it is not context sensitive. We rate documentation satisfactory.

EASE OF USE:

Although there is no tutorial, a novice user should be able to immediately use the basic functions of the program without difficulty. Both the DOS and Windows versions of Team offer interfaces that are fairly intuitive. However, we found that taking advantage of advanced features such as setting configuration parameters is trickier. For example, choosing a template or using the Phone Message Frequent command required a few reads

of the manual and testing to see how it all worked. On-line help, as we mentioned, is not context sensitive, which may make locating information a real challenge for a new user.

The Windows version is, not surprisingly, easier to use than its DOS counterpart. It offers icon buttons stored on a customizable menu bar. Paging through messages is a breeze using the arrow buttons.

Futurus has added drag-and-drop capabilities to Version 2.02. You can now keep various mailboxes open on the mail desktop and simply drag new mail into those mailboxes for storage purposes or drag and drop mail between mailboxes. Unfortunately, the program does not let you drag and drop names from the address list into the address field. The addition of the Teaminator message agent (discussed above) helps to increase the product's ease of use slightly as well. We score ease of use good.

EASE OF ADMINISTRATION:

Because the interface for E-mail users is the same as for E-mail administrators, there isn't much to add here. Setting up users and groups is fairly painless, simply requiring selection from a list. Setting up an MHS gateway, on the other hand, requires some very time-consuming steps. But as Team offers no server-to-server communications, there is little to do. We rate ease of administration satisfactory.

SUPPORT:

SUPPORT POLICIES: Futurus offers free but not toll-free technical support from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern time. Fax and bulletin board support services are available, and you can also E-mail support questions in via MHS. Support policies earn a good score.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT: In calls we made to the Futurus technical support staff, the personnel were friendly but not overly eager to provide complete answers to our questions. We were never on hold for more than a couple of minutes, and our calls were returned within 5 minutes when support staff was not immediately available. Technical support is satisfactory.

VALUE:

Futurus increased its pricing for Team as of September 1. A 25-user version of Futurus Team lists for \$2,495. A remote connection involves a remote user and a host package--both \$149, bringing the total to almost \$2,800. (The closest was Microsoft Mail at just over \$2,000.) Add to this the fact that Futurus does not provide MHS, and that you must purchase a WAN module (\$695) for multiple post offices (the MCI gateway for \$995), and this becomes an expensive E-mail solution.

For just plain E-mail, Futurus Team is not a good value. But if you need scheduling and some of the note-taking and database features, perhaps it's worth the hefty price tag. WordPerfect Office, which offers the same features, is much more reasonable for \$1,800. Value is satisfactory.

COMPANY: Futurus Corp., in Atlanta, can be reached at (404) 392-7979.

REQUIRES: Intel 8088/8086-compatible system or faster; any NetBIOS-compliant network. DOS version: MS-DOS 3.1 (or later), and NetBIOS or IPX for chat module; Windows version: Intel 286 or faster, 2 megabytes of RAM, DOS 3.1 (or later), Mic

rosoft Windows 3.0 or later.

PROS: This product offers all the basic messaging features as well as many useful desMop managing modules.

CONS: You pay handsomely for the functionality provided in Futurus Team--far and away the most expensive product we've reviewed in this category. Team lacks some of the more sophisticated administration functionality that its competitors offer, such as maintenance utilities and directory propagation.

SUMMARY: Overall, you'll pay too much for this product, but if you need all the scheduling and notepad features encompassed within an E-mail product, it's worth a closer look. Compare it with WordPerfect Office, which offers many of these features.

Fritz Nelson and Marios Carpis are PC connectivity experts at a Washington-based Fortune 500 firm.

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